

Team that Jack built slithers on lowly ski slope

By LANCE MASTERS

Wycombe 0, Middlesbro 0

JACK CHARLTON'S Middlesbrough, joint leaders of the First Division get a second chance in the F.A. Cup with a replay on Tuesday after scraping a lucky and ill-deserved draw with Wycombe's remarkable team of amateurs.

Three gentlemen perched precariously on a gasometer, many more watching from a hospital overlooking the ground, and a capacity crowd of 12,000 witnessed the huge embarrassment of Middlesbrough wobbling from one crisis to the next.

It was an astonishing performance, full of fire and conviction, by the Rothmans Isthmian League champions, which poked fun at the much quoted assertion of their manager, Brian Lee, that his team had "no chance."

The notorious Loakes Park slope, which tilts the pitch like a ski run, cannot be used as an excuse by Middlesbrough for the litter of mistakes and lack of compelling rhythm that marked their inept challenge.

Although Middlesbrough looked almost a size larger than their Wycombe rivals, they rarely outpaced them and in their mood of anxiety frequently had their passes intercepted by Wycombe legs which seemed almost telescopic.

Middlesbrough contrived only two discernible shots in the first

half—both off-target efforts by Foggon—and they were so much under siege in the second half that the chant from Wycombe loyalists was a mocking "easy, easy."

Chief among Middlesbrough's tormentors on the field were Perrin, a nimble mover in a crowded penalty area, and the slender, stooping figure of Horseman, a local favourite known to the faithful as "Bodger."

At 34, Horseman has seen better days, although one spectator sounded wistful when Horseman failed to reach an impossibly fast pass. "Then years ago, he would have got that," he announced.

Undignified

It was mostly undignified defence for Middlesbrough in the second period, with the burly Craggs only too pleased to sweep the ball into touch or even out of the ground. The giant Boam took almost everything in the air, but still Middlesbrough struggled to find composure.

Perrin, patrolling the top of the slope, swooped like a hawk to cross the ball and start a wild melee in which Middlesbrough became increasingly desperate until the worthy Craggs conceded a corner.

The closest Wycombe came to scoring was when Phillips launched himself like a torpedo to head a free-kick by Reardon into the side netting.

WYCOMBE.—Maskell, Birdseye, Hand, Mead, Phillips, Reardon, Perrin, Kennedy, Searle, Holifield, Horseman. Sub.: Evans.

MIDDLESBROUGH.—Platt, Craggs, Spraggan, Souness, Boam, Maddren, Brine, Hickton, Mills, Foggon, Armstrong, Sub.: Willey.

Referee.—A. Porter (Bolton).

Tigers keep their smile

Wycombe Wanderers .. 0 Middlesbrough 0

JULIE WELCH

WYCOMBE went into this tie on a cloud of realism. Their manager, Brian Lee, had eschewed all cliches like the Cup being a great leveller, which was just as well, since Loakes Park's 11-foot slope was enough of an old giant-killing chestnut to be going on with.

Realistically or not, Wycombe proceeded to play out of their skulls. True, they were abetted by a Middlesbrough side whose initial huge, hale and brutish appearance metamorphosed quickly into spectral bewilderment, so courageously and confidently did Wycombe dictate the game.

In these circumstances, a goalless draw is a cause for vigorous celebration, not bored discussion. The only shame was that Wycombe might actually have won it with a little more luck, and a little more spit and polish.

Twice in the second half the ball slapped against the wrong side of the netting. First it was Perrin, shoving out a foot to meet Holifield's through pass from the left, with Platt beaten, and much oohing and aahing from the disappointed crowd.

Then, with not long to go, Reardon, who had played with consistent reason and determination throughout, looped a free kick from the right touch-line to the far post. Phillips met it with a scrambling header. That was ever so nearly that.

It would be almost unfair to single out any of Wycombe's men: they all played for one another, scuttled back in defence, piled forwards in attack unhysterically, ceaselessly and with a remarkable amount of skill. Holifield, though, was most obviously a quality player who could claim a League place any day, but Searle, Perrin,

Kennedy and the ageing Horseman all did their bit up front and there was a pleasant absence of those inertia-inducing long balls from defence.

Back there, they had a neat number two, the superbly named Birdseye, who at least for all of yesterday was as calm and elegant as a Madeley. The nicest thing about the team was how happy they looked. They had players who actually smiled.

There's not much to be said about Middlesbrough. They will probably receive Wycombe at Ayresome Park on Tuesday and score all over them. Yesterday, they foundered on the muddy pitch, which before the game already wore an ominous toupee of sand. Far below their robust best, ears filled with the shrieks of the Wycombe supporters, they were never able to be true to their thoroughbred selves. Souness kept his dignity; Foggon, who looked unusually chubby, did not, being replaced by Willey 10 minutes from the end.

Willey's arrival added a temporary bite to Middlesbrough. The steady trek towards Platt reversed as a hopeful ball from Souness was dropped messily by Maskell, who had had few shots to deal with throughout. The Middlesbrough front line surged forward, thousands of Wycombe hearts were in thousands of throats, and Phillips finally, flailingly, cleared the ball into the terraces. They were probably lucky. But you know what they say, the Cup's a great leveller.

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